



During the first four weeks of life, a mother cat provides all the nutrition her kittens need.

CIRCLE OF LIFE

Planning Your Cat Family

Most people adopt kittens from shelters or friends. If you want to add to your cat family on your own, this is your guide. **BY JOELLE RENSTROM**



Nursing is the best
way to ensure the
health of kittens
after they are born.

A

adopting a kitten is a great way to start, or add to, your feline family, but some people are enticed by the idea of raising their own litter, especially if they have a rare or particularly beautiful adult female cat. The idea is seductive, but breeding kittens is complicated, with plenty of hurdles; before you attempt to create a cattery in your house, read our cat family guide.

The most important part of planning your cat family is making sure you have the knowledge and the resources to oversee all steps of the breeding process. This involves everything from knowing which kinds of cats mate well with each other to having a solid plan to find homes for all of the kittens in the litter. Before you breed your own cat family, you'll want to be sure you've carefully considered the mating, birthing and adoption processes, and that you've planned ahead to provide the best care before, during and after birth for the mother and her new kittens.

FINDING A MALE

It's freeing to think of just letting your fertile female cat out for the night during a heat, hoping she will come back impregnated, but there is way more to it than that.

Professional breeders know a lot about various cat breeds and the genetic outcomes of mating different types of cats. According to Pam Johnson-Bennett, certified animal behavioral consultant and author of *Think Like a Cat*, "attempting to breed your cat without this knowledge can result in kittens with congenital deformities." In other words, casual breeding, in which a female cat is encouraged to mate with whatever males might be around, can have undesired outcomes, she says.

So how does one find a suitable mate for their cat? Unneutered male cats, also known as "studs," can father kittens when they're as young as six or eight months and can continue doing so until they're seven or eight years old. They are typically not kept as pets because male cats that aren't neutered can be

COSTLY TASK

Not-for-Profit

BREEDING CATS IS EXPENSIVE

and requires time, knowledge and patience. "If you believe you'll make money from breeding your cat, you're in for a big surprise," warns animal behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett. While licensed, well-established breeders may turn a profit, it's rare for someone who breeds casually to see financial dividends due to the costly necessities required throughout the process.

Not only is the effort costly, it also brings serious responsibility for the new lives. As of 2018,

Wildlife Removal Animal Control estimated that roughly 58 million homeless cats roam the US. Because staying alive is a struggle, stray cats often experience a lot suffering throughout their lives, and they pose problems—from spreading disease, to acting violently toward humans and other animals to constant breeding (one pair of cats can give rise to over 400,000 litters over the course of seven years!) So if you do breed kittens, be sure you are able to find them homes or personally care for every single one.



A female can get pregnant as early as four months of age, when still just a kitten herself—a dangerous course of events.



A cat licks kittens to stimulate elimination and eats the waste to better hide from predators.

After checking
for medical
problems, don't
touch new kittens
for 24 to 48 hours
after birth.

Once the mother has
set a routine and kittens
are three weeks old, you
should handle and talk to
your kittens every day.

hostile and can engage in territorial behavior such as spraying—leaving wet spots to mark territory. Thus, people who own studs generally do so specifically to breed them with females. These owners will have paperwork that reflects updated information about the cat's health and history. Beyond considerations of breed, a cat's health, personality and demeanor are good basic characteristics to observe when looking for a suitable stud.

Owners who obtained their female cat from a licensed breeder should consult that breeder for pairing suggestions. Vets can also advise on breeds and breeders that might make for a good match, and visiting a cat show can also yield helpful leads. Registries such as the American Cat Fanciers Association provide information on breeds, breeders and other mating tips.

QUEEN IN HEAT

Female cats, sometimes called queens, are “in heat” and ready to mate an average of three times per year, though the exact number depends on the cat’s age and health status, as well as the season, environment and temperature (spring and fall are common times for females to be in heat). Female cats who haven’t been spayed can enter a state of heat as soon as they reach puberty, which typically happens between 6 and 10 months of age.

When a female cat is in heat, also known as “estrus,” it’s like she’s advertising on a billboard—any and all male cats in the area will be drawn to her, driven to mate. She might be particularly vocal or restless, and she might ask to go outside more than usual (if allowed) so she can see what male cats might be hanging around. If you would like her to mate with a particular male, be cautious about rolling the dice by just letting her out. Either way, estrus usually lasts about a

week, and if the cat doesn’t become pregnant, she might enter another heat cycle within a few weeks.

The mating process itself, like others in nature, is short and often rough. Sometimes a female and male cat couple once, and sometimes they mate a few times over the course of a few hours to help increase the odds of pregnancy. According to Johnson-Bennett, when this happens, usually the male cat remains nearby, guarding the female from other interested males. If another tomcat successfully mates with the female, it’s possible for her to give birth to a litter of kittens with different fathers.

BIRTHING BASICS

It takes roughly 65 days for a mother cat to carry a litter to term. It may be hard to tell that a cat is pregnant at first, but within a few weeks swelling of the abdomen will be visible. Cats can experience morning sickness and nausea, but typically this doesn’t last long and usually happens early in the pregnancy.

The most important thing an owner can do during a cat’s gestation is to take her to the vet to be sure she and her developing babies are okay (and to keep up with any necessary vaccinations). Vets can also provide nutritional supplements for feline mothers-to-be, who may need more food or special formulas to supplement protein and calcium for developing babies.

When the big moment draws near, the best thing an owner can do is to keep a close eye from a short distance and to take cues from the cat. If a cat is within a week or two of her expected delivery, it’s a good idea not to let her outside so she doesn’t go into labor when she’s

away from home.

The labor process itself has two stages. The first, lasting 12 to 24 hours, involves mild-to-moderate discomfort, nesting and restlessness. A pregnant cat may seem fidgety, grooming herself more than usual or seeking out good nesting spots for giving birth. Providing a box or cubby lined with blankets will help, and it’s also helpful to keep food, water and litter nearby so the mother doesn’t have to go far (keeping spare towels on hand is also a good idea). The pregnant cat will likely stop eating about 24 hours before she gives birth, so while you want to be sure the mother is eating enough throughout her pregnancy, sudden lack of appetite is a sign that labor is imminent.

The second stage of labor is the main event.

The mother cat will exhibit signs of pain,

such as crying, biting or even hissing, and it’s a good idea to not crowd her. Cats prefer some privacy when giving birth, and they’ll want to be warm, comfortable and secure. Once contractions begin, the kittens typically emerge quite quickly, within 30 to 60 minutes. Kittens can be born head first or feet first, and the average litter consists of three to five kittens. The birth of a single kitten shouldn’t take more than 15 minutes—if it does, or if it seems like the mother is struggling, call the vet.

New mothers will tear and clear away the membrane and umbilical cord from a kitten and lick its nose and mouth to clear its passageways for breathing. Subsequent kittens will be born about every 30 to 60 minutes. The mother will deliver a placenta after each.

It’s best to leave the mother cat alone as she prepares her kittens



Kittens are born blind and deaf and depend on mother's warmth and vocalizations to nurse.

for life, but there are a few things to watch out for. According to Johnson-Bennett, mothers sometimes eat stillborn kittens (an instinct to help avoid predators), which is something best avoided. If a kitten in the litter is stillborn, remove it yourself.

Mothers also eat the placenta after each birth—a natural process, but if there's a big litter this could upset the mother's stomach. Verifying that the mother has delivered a placenta for each kitten is important. If a placenta stays inside the mother, it could cause infection.

There are a number of health problems a mother cat might

for the first two weeks. The mother will tend to her kittens constantly, nursing them, cleaning them and ensuring the safety of her nesting spot. During the first couple weeks, the kittens will double in size and their eyes will open.

When the kittens are about three weeks old, you can begin to develop relationships with them through careful contact. Certified Cat Behavior Consultant Mikel Delgado recommends taking advantage of this time to help kittens figure out “what's safe and what's dangerous,” including contact with humans and other pets. If there are other

Mother cats toilet train their kittens at a few weeks of age. You can facilitate by providing a litter box with low sides.

experience after giving birth. A good rule of thumb is to call your vet if anything seems out of the ordinary: if the delivery is taking much longer than expected, if your cat is bleeding or vomiting or if the mother is struggling to produce milk.

CARING FOR NEWBORNS AND THE NEW MOTHER

Even if the birth goes smoothly, it's important to take the mother cat and her kittens (remember, they won't want to be separated) to the vet for a check-up. You want to be sure that the mother has indeed birthed all of the fetuses and placentas, that her milk is flowing normally and that she can feed all her new babies. If a mother cannot nurse properly, you'll need to hand-feed formula to the kittens via a bottle or syringe.

After a vet has checked the mother and her kittens, you'll want to keep a respectful distance from them

environmental factors to which you want to acclimate the kittens, such as the car or the cat carrier, this is a great time to start.

The process of weaning should be gradual. About three weeks after birth, you can start to supplement the mother cat's milk with some canned kitten food or moistened (and softened) dry food. The kittens will also learn how to use a litter box during this time.

At about eight weeks old, kittens should visit the vet for their first vaccinations.

According to Johnson-Bennett, litters should be at least 12 weeks old before they're separated or put up for adoption. Those 12 weeks are important for the kittens' health, as well as for their socialization with both humans and other cats. Twelve weeks, however, is more than enough time to fall in love with a kitten, and it's not unusual for owners to keep a kitten (or two). ♦

TRUE & FALSE

Mothering Myths

HUMANS HAVE BEEN BREEDING

cats for thousands of years, but despite this hands-on experience, confusion about the cat-kitten bond remains widespread. Writing in CatWatch, a newsletter from the Feline Health Center at Cornell University School of Veterinary Medicine, veterinarian Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD, dispels some of the most pervasive myths:

1 If you take a kitten from her mother too soon, she will never know how to mother.

Fact: Feline mothering is innate, Houpt says.

2 Mother cats reject kittens who seem sick. **Fact:** This happens only rarely.

3 If you touch a newborn kitten, the mother will reject him. **Fact:** This probably won't be a problem if the mother cat is your cat, has lived in your home and is used to you and your scent.

4 If you remove a kitten from a new mother, the mother will grieve. **Fact:** The mother will hunt for the kitten for about three days, then move on.

5 If a male and female cat are raised together, the male will demonstrate paternal behavior toward those kittens. **Fact:** “If free to roam, the males usually leave the mother,” Houpt says. A tip: Isolate mother and kittens from any male, even familiar ones, until the kittens are ready to go off on their own.



Three-week-old kittens can adapt to humans but don't want to leave their mothers for very long.